United Nations E/1999/77

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
11 June 1999

Original: English

Substantive session of 1999
Geneva, 5–30 July 1999
Item 6 of the provisional agenda*
Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits

Informal meeting of the Economic and Social Council on basic indicators for the integrated and coordinated implementation and follow-up of the major United Nations conferences and summits (New York, 10–11 May 1999)

Summary by the President of the Council

1. The Economic and Social Council, pursuant to decision 1998/290 of 31 July 1998, taken at its substantive session of 1998, held a two-day informal meeting on basic indicators for the integrated and coordinated implementation and follow-up of the major United Nations conferences. In this decision, the Council also commissioned a report of the Secretary-General which was to consider in a comprehensive manner the work being carried out by the United Nations system and other relevant international and national institutions on basic indicators to measure progress towards the implementation of the integrated and coordinated follow-up of all aspects of major United Nations conferences and summits, including means of implementation, in the economic, social and related fields at all levels, with a view, as a first step, to taking stock and identifying overlapping duplication and gaps (Council decision 1998/290, para. (e)).

2. In accordance with the above decision, the meeting was organized in the format of an interactive dialogue with panels of experts so as to encourage dialogue among the participants and delegations. For the panel discussions, 15 high-level experts in the area of basic indicators were invited; they covered the broad spectrum of users and producers of information from both the national and the international level (see paras. 6–25). The panel discussions were organized around four themes: (a) reviewing progress in conference implementation: difficulties and achievements; (b) international collaboration: major initiatives and gaps; (c) strengthening national statistical capacity and collaboration; and (d) means of implementation and looking forward.

3. The presentation of the panellists led to a rich and wide-ranging dialogue and a productive exchange of views on basic indicators for conference follow-up. This interactive dialogue represented an encouraging further step in the Economic and Social Council's efforts to ensure coherence and cooperation in the multifaceted conference implementation efforts.

4. In the course of the dialogue, the analytical report of the Secretary-General on a critical review of the development of indicators in the context of conference follow-up (E/1999/11), prepared on the basis of a collaborative effort, was welcomed. It was stressed by both

* E/1999/100 and Add.1.

99-17635 (E) 220699

panellists and delegates that the report provided a solid foundation for a comprehensive and fruitful discussion of the issues involved. It was also stated repeatedly that the proposals for the follow-up contained in the report were a valid starting point for further action of the Economic and Social Council. It was suggested by many delegations that the Council should continue addressing the subject of basic indicators at its substantive session of 1999 in Geneva in July. In particular, speakers highlighted two key areas where Council guidance and involvement were believed to be needed: (a) strengthening of national statistical capacity and (b) more effective coordination of international organizations in their indicator initiatives within the framework of follow-up to global conferences.

5. The following summary presents the main issues raised in the debate. They are grouped into six categories: importance of indicators; strengthening national statistical capacity; coordination at international level; core set of common indicators; means of implementation; and role of the Economic and Social Council.

I. Importance of indicators

6. Indicators and statistics are vital to assessing progress towards concrete policy goals as formulated by recent global conferences and national development policies. Indicators also permit the evaluation of whether public resources are being spent efficiently and transparently. Indicators and statistics, if policy-relevant, accurate and timely, are also a powerful tool for raising awareness, thus facilitating effective implementation of the development agenda. To effectively advocate a development programme and to mobilize the necessary resources, good data are indispensable. However, it was also stressed that not all development phenomena can be reflected by numbers.

II. Strengthening national statistical capacity

7. A key theme of the meeting was the need to build national statistical capacity in such a way as to ensure that progress achieved would be irreversible: in brief, the objective must be a sustained development of national statistical systems. This must be done in relation to all stages of the information process, from data collection to analysis and dissemination. A collaborative effort of the United Nations system, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as well as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), is called for in order to build capacity. Panellists stated that, given the heightened awareness of the importance of development information, the moment was opportune for advocating the building of national statistical capacity now.

8. There is a need at the national level to establish effective coordination mechanisms among all information-producing units. In this context, the central role of national statistical offices in the coordination of national departments involved in data collection and dissemination and in the development of methodological and operational standards was noted. The status and the independence of statistical offices need to be strengthened in line with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.[1]

9. The national dialogue between producers and users of information has to be intensified. Policy makers need to involve statisticians in the identification of the information that they require for policy decision-making, and statisticians need to respond in a flexible manner to these information demands.

10. There is a need to establish clear priorities so as to address the problem of data gaps which continue to persist, even for such traditional basic indicators as gross domestic product/gross national product (GDP/GNP) and literacy, but particularly for the newer areas identified by world conferences. In this context, it was underlined that traditional income indicators were not sufficient to capture the multidimensionality of sustainable human development. The challenge is to construct an information system for the social and environmental areas that is similar to the existing information system for economics. Therefore, closing the gaps in respect of data availability of "newer indicators" in the areas of environment, nutrition, housing, health care, the informal sector, women's work and social integration is an urgent necessity. Social integration was cited as a good example of an area with a need for adequately disaggregated data (by relevant social groups and gender). There is also a need for the development of subnational disaggregation to address social issues at the local and regional levels. On the other hand, with respect to globalization, it also appeared increasingly important to compile statistics and indicators addressing global, transnational aspects, such as global warming, multinational corporations and information flows.

11. In addition to coverage, data quality needs to be improved in terms of timeliness, reliability and relevance. A number of programmes exist in the area of capacity-building and should be strengthened.

12. Regional or subregional collaborative networks need to be encouraged to share experiences and to develop common methodologies and practices which suit specific regional and subregional needs. Donors could be invited to support these subregional networks through appropriate training activities so as to create a critical mass of expertise within such subregions.

III. Coordination at the international level

13. There is the sense that overlap among international organizations, both in the creation of indicators and in the collection of information, has become more acute. This may be partly a result of the comprehensive approach, which was encouraged by all international conferences. Proliferation of indicators used by international organizations in relation to conferences has led, in some cases, to overburdening national statistical offices. In others, the data needs of conferences may be ignored. International agencies should make efforts to better coordinate their data requests to countries, avoid duplicative requests and share the data collected. The Economic and Social Council could provide stronger guidance in this endeavour.

14. Coordination must start within international agencies, where often more than one unit is producing statistical information and requesting data.

15. Existing coordination mechanisms, such as the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Subcommittee on Statistical Activities, need to be strengthened and active participation of all members needs to be encouraged.

16. The proposal to create a high-level working group on donor coordination in support of national statistical development strategies required further clarification on participation as well as on its value beyond that of existing mechanisms. It was suggested that the working group secure and maintain a strong link to policy and funding, including bilateral funding. Full involvement of the regional commissions and recipient countries was stressed as being indispensable. One panellist saw the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat as a possible convener. The working group could review funding for statistical programmes in a proactive rather than a reactive manner.

17. The World Bank announced a plan to constitute a special trust fund for statistical capacity-building.

IV. Core set of common indicators

18. The development of a set of common indicators by the multilateral system is important to permit global analysis of progress in implementing conference goals. It can also lessen the burden on member States in providing data. The list of universally accepted and relevant indicators would necessarily have to be limited. Countries and regions will have to add individual indicator sets, in a flexible manner, that are relevant in their development context. Perhaps a hierarchical structure of sets, with national, regional and/or sector extensions could be envisaged. In any event, such a structure would not be a short-term goal: it would need to be developed as a continuously evolving and broadly based consultative process.

19. The Common Country Assessment (CCA) indicator list was seen as a good starting point for working towards a core set of indicators. However, there was still need for more direct involvement and ownership by countries, including through their national statistical offices. It was suggested that careful analysis at the country level of the availability of data for the CCA indicator list should lead to the formulation of statistical programmes supported by the United Nations funds and programmes. Specialized agencies, including the World Bank and IMF, as well as OECD/ Development Assistance Committee (DAC), should participate more fully with their specific sector expertise in the process of further developing and implementing the CCA indicator list.

20. Indicators and data collected internationally must be of value for domestic policy-making. New indicators should be designed through a dialogue process taking into account the existing databases and statistical capacities of countries. Statisticians could advise on the feasibility and costs of certain indicators. The Statistical Commission and the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities could review newly formulated indicators.

V. Means of implementation

21. Conferences have established goals both for socio-economic development and for resource commitments, which are applicable for all countries. Basic indicators are needed to evaluate progress towards conference goals in creating an enabling environment for development. Many stated that the Economic and Social Council should discuss in a more comprehensive manner indicators on the means of implementation of major conferences. More work had to

be done in this area, including monitoring the volume and effectiveness of official development assistance (ODA).

22. A number of delegations also underscored that further deliberations on the issue of basic indicators should focus on conference implementation, rather than on development per se, in accordance with earlier decisions of the Economic and Social Council. In this regard, the emphasis should be on partnership relationships, rather than on donor/recipient relationships.

23. Data collection and statistical capacity-building are expensive. Too often, statistical activities are not adequately funded. It was stressed that development programmes needed to allocate sufficient resources to the generation of adequate information bases which would allow evaluation of the programme implementation. The shortage of financial and human resources makes it even more vital to ensure that maximum use is made of already collected statistics and to eliminate overlap in the creation of new indicators by international organizations.

VI. Role of the Economic and Social Council

24. It was stated repeatedly by delegations that the Economic and Social Council is the appropriate forum in respect of taking the lead in the indicator debate, particularly because of its holistic perspective as well as its overall coordination function, especially for the follow-up and implementation of major United Nations conferences. It is the forum where all concerned parties can come together, including the Bretton Woods institutions, the regional commissions and other international institutions like OECD/DAC.

25. In addition, it was stressed, that regarding specific, more technical decisions on indicators, the Economic and Social Council is supported by those of its functional commissions that are responsible for the follow-up of conferences and the Statistical Commission.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1994, Supplement No. 9* (E/1994/29), para. 59.